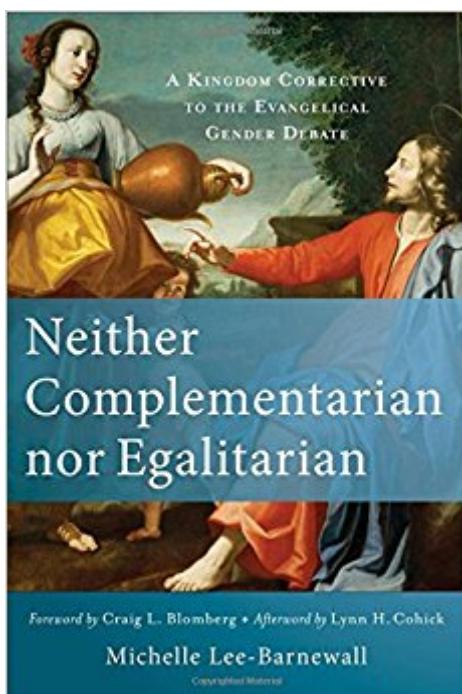


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# Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective To The Evangelical Gender Debate



## **Synopsis**

Regarding gender relations, the evangelical world is divided between complementarians and egalitarians. While both perspectives have much to contribute, the discussion has reached a stalemate. Michelle Lee-Barnewall critiques both sides of the debate, challenging the standard premises and arguments and offering new insight into a perennially divisive issue in the church. She brings fresh biblical exegesis to bear on our cultural situation, presenting an alternative way to move the discussion forward based on a corporate perspective and on kingdom values. The book includes a foreword by Craig A. L. Blomberg and an afterword by Lynn A. H. Cohick.

## **Book Information**

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"Imagine using core biblical themes like corporateness, servant leadership, mutuality, and unity to discuss issues of the relationship of men and women to one another in the church. Imagine focusing not on power or rights but on the example of Christ. If you imagine reframing the gender discussion in helpful ways, then you will be interested in Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian. When one serves while leading and pays special attention to corporate versus individual themes, things are transformed from the way the world (and sometimes the way the church on both sides of the debate) talks about them. Read this book no matter which side of the debate you are on--and think afresh."--Darrell A. L. Bock, Dallas Theological Seminary "The church's debate over gender and leadership has become an intractable problem because we have adopted the model of the world, where leadership is about equality, rights, privilege, power, and position. Michelle Lee-Barnewall

calls for a radical paradigm shift that adopts the upside-down values of the kingdom of God, where humility, love, service, unity, and responsibility replace power, privilege, and position as the guiding principles for true servant leadership. If put into practice, this book would transform not only the gender debate but also the prevailing model for all Christian leadership."--Mark A. L. Strauss, Bethel Seminary San Diego"This well-written book offers a gentle word of correction to sincere Christ followers who are honestly trying to search for biblical truth. It's a perspective-giving message that describes in biblical terms the only way to establish church unity, and it issues a quiet, radical call for pastors and church elders to imitate Christ and the apostles and recall the real cost of discipleship. I highly recommend it as a required textbook for seminary leadership courses."--Sarah Sumner, author of *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership*"In a debate often polarized by shrill rhetoric, Lee-Barnewall rightly urges us instead to take each passage and argument on its own terms and to put kingdom principles first. Regardless of whether one agrees with every detail of Lee-Barnewall's reconstruction, her spirit and larger vision offer a constructive way forward, including a willingness to hear and learn from those with whom we may not agree on every point."--Craig A. S. Keener, Asbury Theological Seminary

Michelle Lee-Barnewall (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is associate professor of biblical and theological studies at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, in La Mirada, California. She is the author of *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ*.

Taking the road less traveled yet much needed, the author gives us a good look again at root issues that Scripture emphasizes, which are different than many of the categories people from "both" camps of the gender role / relationship debate approach with. It's great to take a step back and get your perspective shifted yet stay faithful to keep Scriptures main point the main point!

If you are looking for a theologically sound and culturally relevant discussion on the male-female debate, you will find it here. This book presents a productive way forward by refocusing the discussion on God. This isn't based on feelings but an honest look at what and why the Word says what it does. Barnewall makes it hard to argue that this debate has missed the point pretty drastically.

I really appreciated the approach Michelle Lee-Barnewall takes in this book. The Christian world divides sharply on this point of gender in the home and church. There is much demonizing on both

sides, power plays and demands, framing of the issues in such a way that those who disagree are viewed not only as wrong but as evil. In light of Jesus' call for His people to live in unity and love, Barnewall's book lights the way, showing us that holding to either common position is not to be a matter of asserting our rights over others but is to be rooted in a desire to bless and benefit the other. In terms of content, the analysis of the Genesis 1-3 narrative is excellent and is explained in such a way which shows its affinities to both common positions on gender. I also appreciated the way Barnewall focused on the theme of reversal (which again she shows can be seen in either position from a biblical perspective). The only criticism I can make of the book is that it has a kind of dissertation feel. In most chapters, Barnewall telegraphs at the beginning what she will discuss in the chapter and then goes on point by point to cover this material. The writing doesn't flow. But if the reader is interested in the issue, the book will be an interesting read in spite of the somewhat stiff style.

### Tearing down the dividing wall between complementarians and egalitarians

In the evangelical debates over gender, there has been traditionally two camps. The first is the hierarchicalists, or commonly referred now as complementarians. Backed by the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), this group insists on gender from the perspective of man's authority. On the other extreme, there is a group that calls themselves "egalitarians," backed by the Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) that emphasizes on women's rights and equality of gender. Due to the strong stance taken by both groups, this issue of gender often forces an evangelical to choose either of these views, which can be very polarising for the Christian community. The reason for the impasse is that both camps argue from strong biblical positions. Both sides have people who love the Lord and who are passionate about the Bible. Both sides are trying to speak the truth in love as best as they can. Yet, the differences do remain. Backed by well-known scholars and theologians, both sides have formidable theological support for the views. Is there another way to view the gender debate? Is there some middle ground that others can identify with? Is there a place where both moderate individuals within the existing camps can come together? According to Michelle Lee-Barnewall, the answer is a clear Yes! Key to the formulation of a third view is this culturally sensitive paradigm, that if the ancient views of gender reflect the cultural norms of that day, then our theologies on gender need have interpretations that reflect modern cultural sensitivities. In fact, Lee-Barnewall argues that both complementarians and egalitarians have incorporated their understanding of cultural nuances into their positions. The former is influenced by

rising tides of post-war individualism while the latter's rise parallels the secular feminist movement on the 70s. Some of the key arguments are: Inclusion over equality Emphasize the concept of oneness Move away from earthly status and worldly privilege toward the heavenly authority and divine leadership Focus on sacrifice rather than individual benefits Leadership more of servanthood Be more concerned with kingdom priorities The importance to be more holy rather than more "right" Respect the more transcendent values instead of earthly positionsIt is important to remember that the author is not proposing an explicit third camp but a way to think differently without rejecting the other two positions. Instead, it is to pave the way for people from both camps to think outside the two boxes and to learn to ask different questions. Ensure that our starting points are not the practical considerations. Our starting point must be suspension of our preconceived ideas and reorientate ourselves toward Christ. Step back to let the vision of the Kingdom take root. Recognize how the kingdom of God transcends all human institutions and arguments. Enlarge our perspectives to be more inclusive than before.Part One of the book goes back to the historical developments of the traditional views. From the mid-19th Century to the beginning of the 20th Century, we see a greater participation of women in bth missions as well as social reforms. Many women who used to be in domestic environments are suddenly ushered into leadership positions. With industrialization, independence, and later on, individualism, women increasingly are seen in areas of public speaking, missions, and social concerns. Cultural norms mean women in the home are virtuous. Those outside the home are not as virtuous. After WWII, even more women are sent to public spheres, whether economic or nationalistic. By the 70s, the feminist movement has gotten so vocal and prominent that people question the traditional understanding of women in the home. The civil rights movement in the 60s and equal rights for all all create a fertile ground for the change in gender relations. The key take home in the historical survey is this: Public thought influences religious behaviour; Cultural realities of the day impact the interpretation of biblical texts on gender.Part Two deals with kingdom themes so that we can re-interpret the gender passages from that perspective. The first theme is unity and the common identity as a people of God, in contrast with arguments that emphasize on specific gender roles The second theme is the theological "reversal" which refers to ways in which man's expected ways are upended by God's unexpected ways. Whether we call it counter-cultural or transcendental perspectives, we are reminded that the gospel of Christ will always frustrates those who tries to control God. For the symbol of the servant of God is manifested as the "antithesis of power, status, and domination." Whatever we do, we are to reflect holiness inside and witness outside. Lee-Barnewall compares and contrasts "equality and rights" with "authority and leadership" in the area of ministry. Instead of being stuck in gender roles

defined by either complementarians or egalitarians, why not look at the larger concerns of both genders? Why not expand ministries that are inclusive? Why don't we promote the practice of love, goodwill, and holiness in the community? Why not focus more on being like Christ? Lee-Barnewall makes no judgment on the topic of special male leadership. Instead, she affirms both complementary and egalitarian views with specific obedience to the position of Christ. There is something more important than positional authority. It is servant leadership. She looks at the topic of marriage in two passages of the Bible. The first is Genesis 2-3 about Adam and Eve having a "shared mandate," a togetherness in ruling over the earth, and their unity with regard to obedience to God. The union of one flesh is more important than the specific gender differences. The second passage is Ephesians 5 on husbands and wives. Here, Lee-Barnewall sees kephale as an authority that is "reversed." This headship must be reflected in the context of a "one-flesh" relationship rather than a male superiority perspective. It must be practiced according to the humility that Christ has advocated. Lynn Cohick, Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College offers a thoughtful afterword that praises Lee-Barnewall's attempt to shed more light rather than to introduce more heat into the gender debate controversy. She acknowledges that the topic is a complex and frequently nuanced by the corresponding culture people live in. After pointing out the salient points of Lee-Barnewall's arguments, Cohick offers up five "avenues of inquiry" to move the discussion forward. Central to her affirmation is the kingdom of God emphasis in all discussions. So What? The author is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Talbot School of Theology in Biola University. She has boldly put forth a new way of thinking so that any impasse encountered by either complementarians or egalitarians will have not just a way out but a way forward. Let me offer three thoughts on the book. First, Lee-Barnewall is not offering a specific third way, although it can be marketed as such. This is wise, as any specific position will eventually be criticized by both camps. More importantly, it can be embraced by both groups so that they can find their own way out of their theological quagmires. It's Lee-Barnewall's way of telling everyone: "Wait a minute. Let's pause and think out of the box. See if there is another approach to dealing with the differences in opinion." Rather than to be distracted by the need to find a third position, we are encouraged to think differently, so as to reach a position of unity and service. Second, Lee-Barnewall's position is essentially a way of thinking rather than an explicit position. It is like saying that the "process is more important than the product." Or it could also mean that by following this third process, hopefully there will be an expanded pool of people willing to work and think together to find a new destination. This is helpful up to a certain point. People who tend to sit on the fence will easily embrace this. Those already entrenched will find that Lee-Barnewall did not go far enough. More importantly, this

approach is more like a mediator position. On the plus side, it encloses any impasse which can be liberating. On the minus side, it fails to produce a position that complementarians or egalitarians can be clear about. This can be frustrating.Third, this book is not for everyone. Honestly, anyone who has not grappled hard enough with either arguments of both complementarians and egalitarians will find it hard to appreciate where Lee-Barnewall is coming from. Thus, it is important for readers to first understand the positions of complementarians and egalitarians first before reading a book like this. Otherwise, there is a temptation to use this book to judge all other positions, which is not very gracious.I warmly recommend this book as an additional resource to enrich our discussion of gender and sexuality.Rating: 4.25 stars of 5.conradeThis book is provided to me courtesy of Baker Academic and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. All opinions offered above are mine unless otherwise stated or implied.

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